

Notion of God Through Young Indian Lens: Attitudes and Nuances of Behavior

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Abstract

The concept and worship of ‘God’ or godly entities dates back tens of thousands of years and is deeply intertwined with our worldview and perception of reality. Indian history, unlike the western world, is deeply interwoven with the historical developments of Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Islam. So interwoven, in fact, that much of our daily lives end up reflecting these religious practices even now, in a world of science-based evidence. In the 21st century, India is seeing the rise of a new population: the urban, educated, analytical, self-aware, questioning youth; and this research study attempts to delve into this youth's perception about ‘God’; their attitudes on believing, not believing, and the ethical implications of the same using a survey method. In addition, we endeavour to explore the emotional support God provides, and the discrepancy between belief orientation and social actions, analyzing the similarities between religious and non-religious participants, thereby providing a commentary on the culture of Indian society. The study delves into mystical experiences and their impact on one’s chosen belief orientation, as well as topics of emotional and mental support, evaluating the role of God, family, friends, and self-help activities in stressful situations (e.g. work/exam stress, unwell loved ones, threat to physical/mental health, feelings of sadness and loneliness). The involvement of religion in participants’ social lives was also delved into with questions on their participation in religious activities (visiting places of worship, reading scriptures, offering prayers, etc.) from the lens of spiritual growth, metaphysical guidance, social acceptance, and learnt behaviours. Lastly, a qualitative section delved into participants’ opinions on the pros and cons of believing/not believing in religion, impact of religion on ethics and self-image, as well as why one would shift from believing to not believing, and vice versa.

Keywords: God, Philosophy of Religion, Indian, Young Adults, Attitudes on God, Mental Support, Non-religious Participants, Religious Participants, Critique of Religious Sphere, Morality, Decisional Autonomy, Accountability, Belief

INTRODUCTION

One may receive an assortment of answers to the question ‘what does God mean to you?’

A powerful being, for one; someone who can control our lives and life events. A guide, a protector, a parental figure; a giver of transcendental love, kindness, wisdom, retribution, so on. This concept of a being ‘up in the sky’ has dominated the history of human civilization, despite how relatively new it is. Yahweh, Allah, Amun, Vishnu, Apollo (major deities of Judaism, Islam, Egyptian mythology, Hinduism, and Greek mythology, respectively); several beings that occurred to human intelligence as per their supernatural will and shared the knowledge of ethics, morality, medicine, social behaviour, and rituals with us. These theories and practices made their appearance during the late Paleolithic era in the ritualistic burial of the dead (Sociology Institute, 2022), even older than the practice of drawing on cave walls and the oldest written evidence. They’ve woven their way into our finer sensibilities so intimately that even today, in

an age dominated by science and logical evidence, we borrow imageries of heaven and hell in music and literature.

This paper attempts to ask why they are so prevalent, why or how they became so important to us. Many appeared on Earth bearing the title of godhood, but not everyone enjoyed the same popularity and religiosity as Allah or Christ, and it becomes this research study’s endeavour to understand what ensures this popularity.

At the initial stage this paper attempts to explore the contents of a “godly being,” as well as the social and cognitive reasons that inform belief and persistent faith in a religious figure. Then, we look at Nietzsche and Kant as contending philosophers in the value of a God, followed by Indian young adults and their views about religion, what informs this change and how it manifests, prefaced by the questionnaire devised for the same. Finally, we conclude the paper with the results and implications of the survey, along with the future scope of research on the topic.

HADD, TOM, AND CHARACTERISTICS OF A SUCCESSFUL GOD FIGURE

The earliest worship figurines commonly featured fertility totems, or mother goddess figures, dating back to the end of the Paleolithic era in Europe. This highlights humankind's fascination with the ability to create and nurture life, and the necessity to study the topic in greater depths.

Cognitive scientists attempt to explain the development and subsequent growth of religious practices by introducing two concepts: Hyperactive Agency Detection Device and Theory of Mind (Barrett & Lanman, 2008). HADD is a cognitive device that readily ascribes events in the environment to the behaviour of agents. It is what perceives a rustling in the bushes to be a snake, the creak of a stair to be an intruder. HADD makes humans constantly associate events to be the doing of a conscious, intentional being. The influence of HADD is believed to have evolved into a belief in spirits, subsequently giving rise to the personification of objects controlling aspects of daily human life: sun, moon, thunder, water, and earth. Most polytheistic pantheons feature these gods along with ones

representing the more abstract concepts of wisdom, love, and wealth.

Add to this Theory of Mind, which attributes mental states like beliefs, desires, and intentions to these beings to understand and predict their behaviour, and you have a blueprint of God-human relationship. Humans believe in the existence of a godly being that possesses beliefs, desires, and intentions, and may feel compelled to act according to these desires, lest they incur the wrath of said being; the proof of which we attribute to events of drought or the accidental tea spilled on clothes.

The existence of HADD and ToM provides not only a sense of safety, predictability, and comfort in a constantly changing environment but it also lends to the binding of groups built on common religious identities. It lends to the social cohesion theory by providing a common set of rules and values that are pre-established and agreed upon, creating the basis for cooperation and mutual trust. Suppose there are three families who, due to circumstances, are forced to share a piece of land. They have two options, either live together and share the land, or fight for it. It would presumably be easier to share the land peacefully if the

families belong to the same religious faith. They may even be happy to live together, share resources, and lend help. We see the same phenomenon on a larger scale when people find a sense of community through the common thread of religion, making friends and helping strangers in the name of religion. Gervais and Henrich (2010) note the specific attributes that successful God candidates seem to possess to enjoy prevalence and intergenerational transference, as given by Barrett:

“First, successful God candidates attract attention because they violate a few routine ontological assumptions. That is, they are minimally counterintuitive.

Second, they represent intentional agents. Minimally counterintuitive agents (such as talking potatoes) may be more inferentially potent than are similar non-agent concepts (such as invisible potatoes).

Third, these agents possess strategic information (Boyer, 2001) that makes them relevant to peoples’ lives.

Fourth, successful God representations are described as having detectable inter-actions with our world. Finally, successful God candidates have representational

content that motivates ritual practice that bolsters belief (Henrich, 2009).”

For the purpose for our study, this means that a godly persona must compulsorily have some supernatural features and/or abilities, and are assumed to hold thoughts, feelings, and a will of their own along with strategic information related the future events in our future (whether it’ll rain or not, will I pass an exam or not), often which can be predicted and accessed by the performance of specific behaviours and rituals.

SOURCE OF COMMUNITY

Social psychology further helps us in understanding religion and faith by studying it at three major levels: micro, meso, and macro. The field of study looks at belief, behaviour, and belonging as the key dimensions informing religiosity (Brenner & Stewart, 2025). At the micro level, social psychology looks at social construction and the sources of specific beliefs, performance and frequency of religious behaviours, and the association with a congregation or another type of religious group. At the meso level, theory clarifies the nature and function of shared beliefs, group practices, and cooperation and conflict between religious organizations. At the macro level, social

psychological theory informs investigation of systems of belief, socially structured practices, and group attachment.

It can be said that religion becomes a source of values and personal philosophies that then helps one connect to a community sharing similar values. This sense of commonness fosters feelings of trust. Not sharing these values may provide a cause for othering, contempt or discrimination caused by distrust. This adds a layer of nuance to the question of why one may choose to believe in God, or rather, why one may choose to engage in religious practices even if they may not personally believe in them.

IN CRITIQUE AND FAVOR OF GOD

Various philosophers express their opinions on the utility of religious belief. We look at two philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche and Immanuel Kant in relation to their opinions on the existence of a god-entity.

Nietzsche is most popular for his phrase, “God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.” The context explains that he was referring to the post-enlightenment period in Europe and its impact on religious institutions with the rising influence of science, mathematics, and philosophy, religion or ‘God’ no longer was the supreme

governor of man’s morality, purpose, and perspective in life. People were encouraged to take the onus of meaning-making back into their hands, as Nietzsche too attempted. “Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?” Nietzsche’s question feels overwhelming to even consider, much less to follow through. To think of oneself as God, as the whole and sole entity governing one’s fate and destiny means also holding oneself responsible for all that which occurs in one’s life. Becoming your own God, as well as the subject of this godly power. But the question challenges us to think beyond the boundaries drawn by the expired God, to think beyond right and wrong, good and evil, as we know of it. To create our own set of rules and to reclaim the power of decision-making back in our hands. It asks us to think of ‘what now? Now that no one governs you, no one is coming to help, no higher being to save you, what now? How do you live?’

For Post-Enlightenment Europe and for a lot of us even now, this evokes a feeling of anxiety classic to nihilism. Ripping the rug from under our feet, so to speak. The rug of stability and predictability borrowed from religious philosophies. Concepts of heaven and hell, karma, divine reward and

punishment, all that which made this life easier to understand, removed from the backdrop of our existence. But the absence of this safe, familiar understanding of our world leaves space for the creation of meaning that is more rational, universal, and logical.

As Nietzsche's main focus was on the Christian God, certain questions like these can be posed: If God loves all, why make humans the ruler of the trees and the animals? If God is kind, why not come to the rescue of those trees and animals when the human exploits them? Is the exploitative human the same as the one that was created in the image of God? Such questions, when not answered to a satisfactory level and quality, can lead to loss of faith or disillusionment from the higher entity. As a footnote, theodicy as a philosophy does attempt to answer these questions.

But if one holds God not as a supernatural agency influencing their life, but a passive network of solutions once can access, the idea of divine existence can seem less about godly dominion over human autonomy and more of an autonomous existence supplemented by the metaphysical.

Immanuel Kant's philosophy addresses the importance of God from the viewpoint of

morality. Known for his theories of ethics and duty, Kant views God not as a metaphysical but a moral concept, a rational assumption required to make sense of moral experience. In his seminal work *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant explained that postulating that God exists is important for upholding a moral life. He begins by introducing two functions of knowledge or "human thought": a constitutive function and a regulatory function. As a simplification, those which provide us with an idea of an object, the features and mannerisms of it, constitute knowledge. They build our mental network of information. But certain ideas and thoughts can be safely marked as unhelpful, deconstructive, or even destructive in nature; so, thoughts of regulatory function become of importance. The idea of God, according to Kant, is one such thought, an idea that informs us that our thoughts and outward actions are being morally assessed by a superordinary being. The existence of God cannot be empirically proven, nor objectively experienced, but Kant finds that to be no reason to reject the idea altogether, for the idea also keeps human civil conduct intact. "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith,"

he penned in the second edition of his work. This opens us up to the rational perspective on faith, throwing light on belief maintained by logical necessity for law and order, and understanding the value of a God in fulfilling that.

METHOD

Since most research done on the matter previously is quantitative in nature and does not cover the reason why one would choose to believe in God, as well as the opinions of the population on matters of pros and cons of believing, not believing, and ethics, I chose to create a survey questionnaire that includes nominal items as well as qualitative questions. The survey questionnaire was sent via Google forms to understand aspects of participant's beliefs and lifestyle related to one's religious belief orientation. The questionnaire was created by the author and administered through a purposive snowball sampling method.

Sample

107 individuals filled the survey. Inclusion criteria included age (17 to 25 years old), nationality (Indian residing in India), and fluency in English language. 37 participants identifying as 'religious' (using RP to denote) and 70 participants identifying as one

of the non-religious orientations (atheist, agnostic, freethinker, humanist, skeptic, spiritual) (NRP to denote) participated in the questionnaire.

Questionnaire format and relevance

The questionnaire begins with a section about personal information, limited to name and age. The disclosure of participant's name has been kept optional to increase participant anonymity and confidentiality.

ICE-BREAKERS AND ORIENTATION

Participants are asked the following ice-breakers:

1. Has there been a time in your life when you felt a need for guidance or support from a godly being?
2. Would you say you've physically/mentally experienced support and/or guidance from a godly being, even if just once (e.g. feeling a phantom hand over your shoulder, or some intuitive advice that just 'came to you' when you needed it)?
and
3. What would you say describes your belief orientation most closely? The options being: religious, spiritual, agnostic, skeptic, humanist, atheist, freethinker alongside their definitions. These questions act as a mild dip into the waters that the rest of the

questionnaire delves into. For example, “what would you say describes your belief orientation most closely?” had options provided as: ‘Religious/belief in existence of God,’ ‘Spiritual/belief in supernatural powers, but not any named God,’ ‘Agnostic/unsure about God,’ ‘Skeptic/question religious authority and practices,’ ‘Humanist/belief in one’s power over one’s actions and destiny,’ ‘Atheist/non-belief in God,’ and ‘Freethinker/do not subscribe to any set belief system.’

Choosing ‘religious’ redirects the respondents to a different section of a questionnaire than the rest of the respondents.

This section asks:

- What do you believe more on the topics of genesis of humans, the world, afterlife, etc.: scientific theory (big bang, evolution), or religious theory (seven days of creation, day of judgement, heaven/hell, rebirth)? Options range from ‘I believe in scientific theory far more’ to ‘I believe in religious theory far more.’ There are also options such as ‘I haven’t thought about it’ and ‘I pick-and-choose according to what makes sense/what’s convenient,’ keeping in mind that individuals may not give such ideas much thought.

- Do you consciously differentiate between religious theory (moksha, ashtanga marg, qadar, day of judgement) and mythological stories (Rahu-Ketu, Abel and Cain, John the Baptist)? This gives us an idea into whether people are conscious of their thought processes as well as whether the two (i.e. religious theory and mythology) ring true equally, hinting that if one believes in one of them then belief in the other may also occur subsequently.

Individuals who choose an orientation other than ‘religious’ are redirected to a section that asks: ‘How does your selected orientation manifest in your daily life (your attitudes, behaviours, thoughts about self/world, etc.)?’

The question is meant to assess cognizance about the topic (whether they provide elaborate answers or simply respond with ‘I don’t know’) as well as the ways they have observed non-religiosity impact their personal life.

SITUATIONS PEOPLE TURN TO GODLY SUPPORT FOR

Both sets of participants are directed to this section that attempts to explain the persistence of religious beliefs from the viewpoint of emotional, social, and psychological support. For non-religious

participants, it provides insight into their solutions to such situations; whether they turn to themselves, family, friends, or coping techniques such as yoga or journalling.

The situations given are:

- When faced with exam/work stress
- When a loved one is severely unwell/critical
- When I'm feeling deeply alone and/or sad
- When faced with impending danger or a threat to physical/mental health

The section ends by asking what other situations one turns to God or a support system for and whether it provides adequate emotional/psychological support.

LIFESTYLE PRACTICES

This section gives insight into discrepancies between participants' beliefs and behaviours. As a hypothesis, it is presumed that regardless of religious orientation, individuals may attend religious events and engage in such activities equally, as these practices are finely interwoven into the fabric of Indian culture and tradition. It provides a commentary on the cultural identity of India, and the ability of Indians to maintain a

distinction between their orientation and social practices.

Participants must report their behaviour from past one month on given situations:

1. I visited a place of worship at least once
2. I have offered prayers to a God figure at least once
3. I have read religious scriptures
4. I surround myself with friends and family who are religious in faith
5. More often than not, I find myself thinking that there is a higher power controlling my world and my reality
6. More often than not, I find myself believing that the world around me was created by some human-like figure; and is not a product of simple scientific evolution
7. More often than not, I find myself thinking that the world around me is too good to not be created with intention; rather than simple scientific evolution
8. More often than not, I find myself thinking that the world around me is too bad to not be created with intention; rather than simple scientific evolution
9. More often than not, I find myself blaming luck/some higher power when things go wrong in life

10. More often than not, I find myself thanking my luck/some higher power when things go well in life

11. More often than not, I find myself thinking/talking about going to a heaven/hell after death Participants must report if they engage in such thoughts and activities willingly and consciously, and why they do/do not. A possible explanation could be pressure from family and society, as well as habitual performance or preference for these activities and environs.

BENEFITS OF BELIEFS

Provides insight into why participants' beliefs regarding the two groups of belief systems. Questions asked were:

1. What are some benefits of being religious?
2. What are some drawbacks of being religious?
3. What are some benefits of not believing in God?
4. What are some drawbacks of not believing in God?
5. Does believing/not believing in religion impact your sense of ethics and morality? Why/why not?
6. Does believing/not believing in religion impact how you perceive your looks,

personality, skills, and overall worth? How so?

7. Do you believe people who are religious are more ethical/moral than people who are not?

8. If you were religious in the past, but no longer subscribe to the belief, what made you change your stance? Was there a specific instance that made you change your belief?

9. If you did not believe in God in the past, but subscribe to the belief now, what made you change your stance? Was there a specific instance that made you change your belief?

Answers to these questions, as well as the qualitative questions of section 3 and 4 were analysed thematically.

RESULTS

This section provides the description as well as an interpretation of the pie charts and bar graphs observed in the questionnaire.

- The majority of the participants fell under the age bracket of 18-20 years, making up 66.4% of respondents.
- One-third participants reported identifying as religious in orientation, as opposed to being agnostic, atheist, freethinker, humanist, skeptic, or spiritual. Religious: 34.6%, Freethinker: 15.9%,

Skeptic: 13.1%, Humanist: 10.3%, Spiritual and Agnostic: 9.3%, and Atheist: 7.5%. These were surprising as one may find more individuals identifying as merely atheist, or skeptic in layman discussions. These results display the meta-awareness of participants regarding their belief orientation when exposed to the meaning of the terminologies. It was also fascinating to know the percentage of young adults who identified as religious. The self-disclosing nature of the questionnaire could possibly have lowered the hesitation participants might face.

- 67.3% participants mentioned having experienced a time in their life when they felt a need for guidance or support from a godly being, another 16.8% reported needing such guidance sometimes, shedding light on the plausible reasons why one may require such metaphysical figures in their life.
- 43% participants reported physically and/or mentally experiencing support/guidance from a godly being, even if just once in their life. 30.8% respondents reported not having such an experience. Out of the 10 participants identifying as Spiritual, 8 reported experiencing such supernatural presence, with the rest reporting 'maybe.' Out of the 37 Religious participants, 27

reported having such an experience, while 7 out of the 8 Atheist participants reported having no such experience, hinting at the role of past metaphysical experiences in shaping one's orientation.

- When asked whether they believed more in scientific theory or religious theory in terms of genesis of humans, the world, afterlife, etc., 35.1% of RPs reported giving equal weightage to both, 18.9% reported believing in religious theory slightly more, and 10.8% reported either believing in religious theory far more, or not having thought about it altogether, respectively. These results align with and provide support for Hall & Delport's results in an Indian context.

- Religious vs. non-religious participants: These results pertain to religious (RPs) and non-religious participants' (NRPs) choices in Section 3 and 4 of the questionnaires, where one's choice of support system and lifestyle practices are being understood.

SUPPORT SYSTEMS

1. 59.5% RPs reported turning to God sometimes when faced with exams or work stress. On the other hand, around a third of

the NRPs either reported solving it on their own or seeking the support of friends (32.9% and 34.3% respectively). 20% reported seeking familial support, and the rest use activities such as meditation, journaling, or any physical activity to help themselves.

2. 75.7% RPs reported always seeking God when a loved one is severely unwell/critical. 44.3% NRPs reported seeking support from family, with the number of individuals seeking friends or solving it on their own being somewhat similar (27.1% and 24.3% respectively).

3. 56.8% of RPs reported turning to God sometimes when they're feeling deeply alone or sad, the rest turning to God almost always. 2 participants specifically mentioned turning to family along with going for walks, rewatching movies, or snacking. 44.3% of NRPs turn to friends for the same situation,

34.3% reported not seeking anyone. Only 10% of the participants reported seeking support from family, hinting at the amount of support they may be expecting to receive in matters of mental health.

4. When faced with impending danger or a threat to their physical/mental health, 67.6% of RPs reported turning to God, rest turning to God sometimes. In NRPs, 30% reported not seeking anyone for support, with people seeking family and friends quite similar in numbers (27.1% and 25.7% respectively). Rest reported using meditation, journaling, physical activities or other such tools.

LIFESTYLE PRACTICES

Graphs looked quite similar in some instances, and in some were extremely different

Table 1

Responses in percentage to statements in section 4 of survey questionnaire

Statements (in the past 1 month)	Religious Participants (%)			Non-religious participants (%)		
	Yes	No	Maybe/Some times/Don't	Yes	No	Maybe/Some times/Don't

			know			know
Visited a place of worship at least once	86.5	13.5	-	81.4	12.9	5.7
Offered prayers to a God figure	91.9	8.1	-	80	15.7	4.3
Surrounded by friends & family who are religious by faith	48.6	2.7	48.6	45.7	8.6	45.7
Have read religious scriptures	43.2	18.9	37.8	40	21.4	38.6
Find themselves wondering if there's a higher power controlling their world and reality	67.6	32.4	-	50	50	-
Find themselves subscribing to the belief that the world around them was created by some human-like figure; and is not simply a product of scientific evolution	59.5	40.5	-	30	70	-

Find themselves thinking that the world around them is too good to not be created with intention; rather than scientific evolution	75.7	24.3	-	27.1	72.9	-
Find themselves thinking that the world around them is too bad to not be created with intention; rather than scientific evolution	51.4	48.6	-	25.7	74.3	-
Find themselves blaming luck/some higher power when things go wrong in life	45.9	54.1	-	34.3	65.7	-
Find themselves thanking my luck/some higher power when things go well in life	94.6	5.4	-	54.3	45.7	-
Find themselves thinking/talking about going to a	43.2	56.8	-	28.6	71.4	-

heaven/hell death	after						
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The first four questions, pertaining to personal religious practices, do show similarities in percentages, but as we go into the impact of religious experiences on participants' thoughts and beliefs, the answers become quite varied, sometimes even contrasting. This shows a weak but positive support for the hypothesis. When asked whether these thoughts and practices were undertaken consciously and willingly, a common answer was pertaining to the influence of childhood teachings and familial norms and its influence on what participants practiced, whether willingly or not.

QUALITATIVE THEMES

In the long answer questions of sections 3, 4, and 5, both RPs and NRPs showed common themes that can be classified in this manner:

CRITIQUE OF RELIGIOUS SPHERE

There appeared to be a clear set of opinions on what were the pros, cons, and neutral aspects of religion in terms of its practices, practitioners, and impacts on religious and non-religious individuals alike. Surprisingly, a portion of participants were clear in their

stance that religious philosophies as given in scriptures are kind and respectful towards even those who don't follow the religion and that it's the practitioners who bias or distort these philosophies as per their convenience. With this, I hope to set a neutral, civil, and constructive tone to the further discussion.

Humans commit numerous atrocities in the name of religion. This was talked about extensively by both RPs and NRPs, who outlined instances of terrorism, rapes, murders, bullying, shaming, and so on to support this viewpoint. Dogma, or blind faith, also comes into play, where those who blindly follow a religious leader/philosophy end up exchanging individual moral thought for 'showing support' to their faith. It can be synonymised to the exchange of hateful comments on social forums in the name of being faithful or showing support to one's favourite artist or TV series. Underlining this exchange is a kind of implicit conditioning that one may face, wherein communities or family members support the disuse of autonomous moral decision making—a "thinking for oneself" in

terms of ethical and moral conduct—in favour of following a preset list of do's and don't's as expatiated by a known spiritual or religious figure. This disuse, once a force of habit, continually makes an individual vulnerable to propaganda, and they are more likely to assume everything to be religiously right without a thorough verification. The urge to doubt is less likely to occur if one has accepted to generally doubt less and believe more.

As for the ones distorting texts for convenience, the intention can be wide-ranging and creative, going from rightfully prohibiting masses from undertaking an activity (e.g., many religions look down upon the practice of polygamy or having multiple partners, despite the existence of mythology depicting otherwise) to prohibiting contact with and promoting exclusionary treatment of certain classes of society (e.g. women, *shudras*, or religious sects claiming non-followers to be 'primitive' or 'in need of saving/enlightening'). They not only attack the autonomy and right to expression of an individual, but also enable the shaming of those who choose to express themselves in a different light.

As explained by a participant, "[Extremist religious belief] creates a divide. Divide

creates hatred. Hatred leads to violence. [It] gives birth to those who incite violence or use this hatred for their own benefit (politicians & religious leaders). Basically, extremism in any religion all leads to this same vicious cycle. Hatred and subsequent violence only lead to revenge and the cycle of revenge is never-ending."

Few participants also raise questions about the presence of God in moments where injustice was prevailing, with the attacks on Gaza and the RG Kar Kolkata rape case being given as examples. In such situations, the omnipresence and kindness of God can come into question and strain any faith one may hold.

But equally numerous reasons were provided to explain the benefits of religiosity. Mental and emotional support, strength, and sense of hope & purpose are factors provided by participants that explain the persistent, loyal, and intense following religion enjoys; reaffirming why nihilistic philosophy is so hard to practice. Religion also provides a sense of community, in line with the theories of social psychology. "I think during the worst or negative situations I get a lot of support with just the thought that God will take care of me," reported a participant. "If I completely turn to him, that helps me to let go of stress or anxiety

or any unpleasant feelings. And when something positive or good [...] happens to me I turn to him and thank him and show my gratitude towards him which in turn helps me humble and ground myself.”

For some, God acts as less of a divine master and more of a north star, a passive guiding light that you can look for in need of directions. When asked about the cons of not believing in God, some participants reported that figuring out a moral code for yourself can be a tedious task to undertake, something that religion provides freely. Morality acts as a stable foundation for the construction of a healthy society, and since religion is an enduring institution present in most societies, its influence is visible in every individual’s personal ethical code, whether directly or indirectly. Words such as ‘structure,’ ‘discipline,’ and ‘code of conduct’ were used frequently. It was also noted that the simple comfort of someone watching over you and providing hope that things will get better was enough to count as a benefit of believing in God, if only to remedy the desire to have a kind witness to our lives.

God can also become the answer for those who find meaninglessness in life. A participant explained this feeling as “just you against the

noise [i.e. ups and downs of daily life].” At times, this inherent meaninglessness can also leave one questioning the reason for suffering, love, and life itself, without any convincing answers. In such cases, religion becomes a safe haven, a shelter to return to for peace and certainty in uncertainty. A smaller group of participants responded neutrally to the impact of God, reporting that they’ve simply never felt ‘a connection’ with any godly figure but may hold curiosity towards it. One participant provided a wonderful anecdote on the matter, “my philosophy professor once said that God is like zero. We cannot prove that it exists (because zero is nothingness and nothing cannot exist. Because if nothing existed, it would be something). But we need zero in order to solve mathematical equations many times. Similarly, we need God to solve these ‘equations.’” Godly beings can be thought of as answers to our philosophical problems, a tentative theory whose impact is not visible on a daily basis yet makes life easier to understand, rationalise, and live. Participants exhibited a kind of passivity regarding the existence of a supernatural being, neither holding any expectations nor any grudge from the entity.

ROLE OF UPBRINGING & LIFE

EXPERIENCES

When asked if belief in God or practice of religious activities were always done consciously, phrases such as ‘childhood,’ ‘parents,’ and ‘grew up seeing it’ were used commonly. What we see in our homes and communities is what we believe to be normal, at least for the initial years of our lives. School, college, and career bring avenues for meeting people who think, feel, and act differently, further influencing our ways of thought; social learning theory, though its focus was on actions rather than beliefs. For my participants, the most common route was going from believing to not believing in religious practices, shifting from having faith towards a scientific and non-religious reasoning: “I once believed [in God] but don’t anymore. It wasn’t sudden, it was gradual. I started asking questions, looking for answers beyond tradition. Science, experience, and life’s uncertainties made me realize belief isn’t something you inherit, it’s something you choose. There wasn’t one moment, just a growing understanding that meaning can exist without faith,” explained one participant.

Kirkpatrick & Shaver (1990) explain one possible reason as to why individuals may grow up with relatively non-religious parents

and become more religious as adults. They observe that participants with avoidant attachment reported significantly higher rates of sudden religious conversions during both adolescence and adulthood, irrespective of parental religiosity, suggesting that God and religion may function in a compensatory role—a substitute attachment figure—for such individuals. According to ICSW (2023), individuals with an avoidant attachment are those with a caregiver who was either unavailable or rejected them during infancy, which forced the child to quickly rely on themselves and themselves only in order to self-soothe, building a foundation of avoiding intimacy. God may act as a safe space for the projection of unmet needs onto a figure that is unseen, yet kind and accepting without the reciprocity expected in a human-to-human relationship, thereby adding a therapeutic touch to this spiritual experience.

A participant reported that gods were “just creations of humans to cope with things they didn’t know,” giving the example of sun and thunder, giving a nod to Barrett’s theories and explaining how the notion of gods evolved with the needs of humankind. “[We] don’t know what is sun but know that it provides warmth, [so we] make it a sun God. There is

thunder which occurs occasionally but has devastating power. It might be the king of said gods, the thunder God a.k.a. Indra or Zeus.”

MORALITY & DECISIONAL AUTONOMY

NRPs had strong opinions related to religion’s control over human decisional making autonomy. The word ‘accountability’ was used frequently, with participants expressing the need to divorce religious philosophies from moral codes of conduct. In an ideal world, the need to be good and do good would have nothing to do with an end goal of divine reward or heaven or nirvana, and everything to do with doing what one believes is right based on ethical and just considerations—a Kantian categorical imperative, so to speak. One participant even goes as far as to claim that religious people are less ethical, but the majority of both RPs and NRPs suggest that an ethical code can be derived even without the support of God—though the influence of God may still be present since religion proves to be a helpful “rulebook.” As explained by a religious participant, “belief or disbelief in religion can shape one’s sense of ethics and morality, but not define it because while religion offers divine laws and a moral framework rooted in faith, a nonbeliever may

draw equally strong ethics from reason, empathy, and shared humanity; ultimately, both paths lead to the same question: what does it mean to do good?”

One common theme was the debate over whether it is right for morality to be dictated by philosophical scriptures that are “written by men thousands of years ago” and perhaps outdated. Some religious participants unintentionally rebut saying that scriptures can act as an ‘objective’ set of rules in the face of human subjectivity.

NO PROS FOR OPPOSITION

An interesting observation was that a section of participants responded to the pros and cons questions in section 5 as ‘none’ and ‘all.’ 10.8% RPs reported being religious as having no drawbacks, 32.4% reported not knowing the pros of being non-religious and another 10.8% believed there are no pros whatsoever. Similarly, 25.7% NRPs reported not believing in God as having no drawbacks and 10% reported being religious as having no pros. Some assumed that opinions pertaining to the opposite orientation (non-religious participants on the pros and cons of being religious, and vice versa) were not applicable to them, and so responded to them saying “N/A” or “idk bro I’m religious.” This raises

questions about the implicit thinking pattern behind them, pointing to a lack of care about whether or not the grass is green at all on the other side.

SHIFT AWAY/TOWARDS RELIGIOSITY

When asked ‘if you were religious in the past, but no longer subscribe to the belief (and vice versa), what made you change your stance? Was there a specific instance that made you change your belief?’ participant responses were strongly influenced: (i) Vicarious/personal injustice, (ii) Lack or experience of supernatural proof, (iii) Gradually shifting towards rational and scientific reasoning, or (iv) Finding meaning and purpose in religion and God during times of hopelessness.

“Maybe it wasn’t one moment, but a quiet drift, questions that once had answers began to echo back with silence. Seeing pain that prayer couldn’t fix, or good people suffering while the cruel thrived, can shake faith. Sometimes it’s just growing older, realizing belief once gave comfort, but truth now feels sacred in a different way—in wonder, in doubt, in the search itself,” and “there came a moment when reason could not quiet the ache in my soul, when beauty, love, and suffering felt too

profound to be mere accident; in that silence, I did not find proof, but I found God” are powerful answers by two participants that not only shook me to my core but also beautifully romanticise the two sides of the coin; how neither logic nor faith can be claimed completely useless or completely useful. It speaks of the subjectivity of the fit, why one cannot fully abandon the importance of faith and religiosity while moving towards a future of science and rationality.

The amount of mental clarity, moral and intellectual thought displayed by the participants was notable, reflecting the commitment of the generation to move away from the blind compliance. Religious and non-religious alike, majority participants had high levels of awareness as to why they believed what they believed, with numerous thoughts and experiences shaping their attitudes. It is important to remember that the existence of God still is a phenomenon that cannot be proven nor disproven, and therefore individual sentiments about God or religion cannot be classified into categories of ‘right’ and ‘wrong.’ The themes and discussions that took place were a reflection of the opinions of a sample populous, and are hopefully understood in that context.

I'd like to end the discussion by sharing a participant's response: "All religions exist for the betterment of a human and the society itself. But the issue is many things are misinterpreted and misunderstood which causes confusion. [...] [All] religions talk about peace and diligence."

IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical implications:

1. Understanding Belief Persistence: The study contributes to the theoretical understanding of why belief in godly beings persists among young Indian adults despite the predominance of scientific and analytical thinking. It highlights cognitive and social psychological factors such as minimally counterintuitive concepts, intentional agency, and strategic information that make God figures cognitively attractive and transmittable across generations.

2. Philosophy of Religion Perspectives: By including perspectives from philosophers Nietzsche and Kant, the study illustrates contrasting rationales about the role and necessity of God in morality and meaning-making. Nietzsche's view challenges traditional godhood, while Kant supports the regulatory function of God in maintaining ethical order even without empirical proof.

3. Complex Identity and Belief Orientation: The findings reveal that religious identity among urban Indian youth is nuanced, with many participants endorsing mixed belief orientations (e.g., combining scientific and religious theories), and some non-religious participants still engaging in religious practices culturally embedded in Indian society.

4. Decisional Autonomy and Morality: The study underscores the tension between religious doctrines and personal moral agency, especially among non-religious youth who emphasize accountability independent of religious authority as part of their decisional autonomy.

Practical implications:

1. Mental Health and Emotional Support: The study shows that belief in God or engagement with religious practices provides significant emotional, psychological support and hope during stressful or adverse situations for many young adults, which can be leveraged in mental health interventions or community support programs.

2. Social Cohesion and Community: Despite divergence in personal belief, religious practices remain important social rituals that facilitate community bonding and shared values, emphasizing the need for inclusive

approaches that respect diverse beliefs while fostering social harmony.

3. Educational and Counseling Settings: Awareness of the complex interplay between upbringing, life experiences, and belief orientation can inform educators, counselors, and policymakers in designing culturally sensitive curricula and support services that acknowledge spiritual and non-spiritual worldviews.

4. Future Research and Methodology: The study highlights the importance of developing standardized, nuanced instruments for assessing religiosity and spirituality among Indian youth, encouraging longitudinal and geographically diverse studies to better capture evolving belief patterns.

With these insights, I hope to provide a comprehensive framework to understand and engage with the diversity in religious attitudes and behaviors of young Indian adults in our contemporary society.

LIMITATIONS

- Gender and the religion one was born in were aspects that were not investigated that could have provided us with more insights.
- Since the method chosen was snowball and purposive sampling, the survey did not touch rural parts and perhaps even specific

states of India. More rigorous sampling methods or a longer data collection period could have aided this problem.

- The data collection period was October and November, and celebrations or post-exam praying could have biased my results. A longer data collection period can help with this too. It would have also helped acquire a bigger sample size.

- Language restrictions due to the questionnaire being in English could've prevented the non-English speaking population from participating.

- The survey was in a self-report method. This may have led to bias, social desirability, underreporting, or overgeneralisation of behaviour.

- The questionnaire was created by the author and is hence non-standardised. Further research and refinement are required to make parameters of religious social activities and perceptions related to religion more quantifiable.

- It was assumed that respondents who fell under the non-religious category, i.e. respondents who selected Spiritual, Freethinker, Atheist, Agnostic, Skeptic, or Humanist as their belief orientation, would not rely upon a God-figure during situations of

stress (section 3 of questionnaire). 'I turn to God sometimes' option was not given to them. Similarly, respondents of religious category were not explicitly provided with the options of 'friends,' 'family,' 'I solve it on my own,' and 'meditation, journaling, etc.' which could've provided us with more nuanced insights, paving the way for potential future research.

CONCLUSION

One-third of the participants recognised themselves as 'religious' (34.6%) in orientation, but the aggregate of non-religious identities still dominated the sample population (65.4%). Religious identity was followed by Freethinker (15.9%), Skeptic (13.1%), and Humanist (10.3%). Atheist identity was the smallest group (7.5%), perhaps due to the nuance the other options provided. A large majority of religious and spiritual participants (74.4%) reported having a mystical experience at least once in their life, highlighting the role of past metaphysical experiences in shaping one's orientation. A large majority of religious and non-religious participants reported having visited a place of worship and having offered prayers to a God figure at least once in the past month ($\approx 83.9\%$

and $\approx 85.9\%$), revealing the presence of religious practices in social spheres of life.

In the analysis of qualitative answers, themes such as the implications of religious practices and institutions in modern life were extensively discussed, which included the pros, cons, and neutral aspects of this area. Strong opinions were expressed about the theme of decisional autonomy, where participants put forth their opinions on ideas of dependency, moral agency, and accountability. As a pilot study, the results reveal intriguing insights about Indian young adults and their experiences.

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